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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 BANGKOK 000413

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SUBJECT: ADMIRAL WILLARD'S VISIT TO THAILAND: RTG FOCUSED  
ON REGIONAL LEADERSHIP

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Classified By: Ambassador Eric G. John, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Senior Thai leaders provided their view of the strategic goals for Thailand and the nations' goals for the future for PACOM Commander Admiral Willard during his February 2-7 visit. Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva encouraged increased U.S. engagement in the region, particularly given shifting power dynamics and recent questions about China's intentions. Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya described Thai government plans to assume again a more high-profile role on the international stage and to push for democracy, economic development, and human rights in Southeast Asia. Admiral Willard encouraged the Thai military and civilian leadership to share their views on Thailand's strategic and regional focus, as this would assist the Pacific Command's analysis of top strategic issues. The PACOM Commander also commended Thailand for leadership in the region, especially as the recent Chair of ASEAN, and for support for peacekeeping operations. The Thai expressed deep appreciation for U.S. support for equipment to be used in deploying peacekeepers to Darfur. Septels cover bilateral relations and domestic Thai issues. End summary.

¶2. (C) Comment: Admiral Willard's visit was very useful in demonstrating USG and PACOM interest in working closely with Thailand as it strives to take on a positive regional leadership role. Thai government officials and private citizens provided creative suggestions for positive roles for U.S. and PACOM assistance via the Lower Mekong Initiative. End comment.

¶3. (C) During the February 2-7 visit, Admiral Willard and the Ambassador met with Prime Minister Abhisit Vejjajiva, Defense Minister Prawit Wongsuwan, Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya, and Royal Thai Armed Chief of Defense Forces General Songkitti Jaggabatra. In addition, Admiral Willard and the Ambassador engaged Royal Thai Army (RTA) Commander General Anupong Paojinda and RTA Deputy Commander General Prayuth Chan-ocha, Deputy Secretary General for Prime Minister Abhisit and Acting RTG Spokesperson Dr. Panitan Wattanayagorn, CP Group Executive Vice President and former high-ranking Thai diplomat Dr. Sarasin Viraphol, and Assistant Group Editor of the Nation Multimedia Group Kavi Chongkittavorn.

PM ENCOURAGES US PRESENCE IN ASIA WITH THE RISE OF CHINA

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¶4. (C) During a February 5 meeting with PM Abhisit, Admiral Willard highlighted PACOM's commitment to a robust forward presence in Asia and asked for the Prime Minister's views of regional security concerns. Abhisit said that Thai-Chinese relations were close, and that Southeast Asia and Thailand had been beneficiaries of China's economic growth. There were, however, areas of concern, as Southeast Asian nations now faced increased competition from China in some business sectors, particularly as the ASEAN-China Free Trade Agreement had come into force at the beginning of the year.

¶5. (C) Abhisit also noted that while China had in recent years shown a willingness to take on a more collaborative international role, such as through its role on the UN Security Council, the recent controversy with Google had exposed a more worrisome aspect of China's rise. Admiral Willard described PACOM's desire to manage the U.S. military relationship with the PLA carefully, and to encourage closer contact with the Chinese. Abhisit told Admiral Willard that, considering shifting power dynamics in the region, it was important to sustain the U.S. military's long-standing relationship with Thailand and others in Southeast Asia. Admiral Willard said PACOM would continue to watch closely developments in the region, especially those in the South China Sea.

#### ASEAN AND ADMM PLUS

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¶6. (C) PM Abhisit highlighted the RTG's desire for expanded cooperation with the U.S. One example could be for the U.S. to look for ways to deepen collaboration with ASEAN as the

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organization builds humanitarian assistance and disaster relief capabilities (HA/DR). Willard told the PM that the development of HA/DR capacity in Southeast Asia was important to PACOM and the U.S. Abhisit also said that as Chair of ASEAN during 2008-09, Thailand had tried to move the organization forward on the development of a single economic community. Progress on this initiative would be important, as it was taking place in conjunction with the rise of China.

¶7. (C) PM Abhisit told Admiral Willard that Thailand was committed to the ADMM Plus eight concept, as it would allow for U.S. participation. Foreign Minister Kasit Piromya separately February 5 characterized the U.S. as a key member of the Asia-Pacific community and as a pillar of regional security. The reality for Kasit was that the U.S., with its forward presence through the Seventh Fleet and regional bases, was an important part of Asia. As such, Kasit said Thailand was committed to ensuring that the development of ADMM Plus included U.S. membership.

¶8. (C) In a separate February 5 meeting, Defense Minister Prawit said that he wanted to continue to strengthen relations with the U.S., and would work to ensure U.S. participation in the ASEAN Defense Ministers Meeting (ADMM) Plus framework. ASEAN, with Vietnam as Chair, would meet in May to decide on membership of ADMM Plus, but the RTG viewed the U.S. membership as essential.

#### VISION OF THAILAND'S FUTURE

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¶9. (C) Admiral Willard in his meetings reviewed PACOM's top strategic issues, including an in-depth look at allies and partners such as Thailand. As such, Admiral Willard asked his interlocutors for their view of Thailand's strategy over the next five to ten years. PM Abhisit said that small and medium countries such as Thailand were well-placed to provide a conducive environment for peace and security. Thailand in particular had an important role to play in Southeast Asia,

as there were gaps in the development of democratic political systems of some of the nation's neighbors. As such, Thailand viewed as strategically important encouraging neighboring countries to become more integrated into the international community and to accept international norms. While other ASEAN nations also were attempting to do this, Thailand's geographic location presented the RTG with a unique responsibility, Abhisit said.

¶10. (C) PM Abhisit highlighted that 2010 was an important year for Burma due to the planned elections there; he hoped that countries inside and outside ASEAN could make positive contributions in moving Burma towards democracy.

¶11. (C) FM Kasit told Admiral Willard that Thailand should be a regional leader; however, during the last ten to fifteen years, the nation had been stagnant due to internal security issues and political struggles. Thailand had also taken a step back while China had developed over the same timeframe. That said, Kasit highlighted the Abhisit administration's goals to return Thailand to a more prominent position within Southeast Asia and the international community. While solving internal political and security problems was critical, Thailand was trying to become more active on UN issues and would look to provide more support for UN peacekeeping and humanitarian assistance missions. Kasit also described RTG plans to become a regional leader in areas of environmental protection and agricultural development.

¶12. (C) FM Kasit contrasted Thailand's recent history "of waiting on the sidelines" with Brazil's rapid development and assumption of international influence. While Thailand would not seek a position on the world stage that matched Brazil's, it was important for the RTG to aspire to do more, as its geographic location between the Pacific and Indian Oceans was important. Kasit underscored that Thailand would emphasize the development of open democratic institutions, connectivity, human rights, and the rule of law as it strove for renewed regional leadership.

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¶13. (C) FM Kasit highlighted the fabric of Thai society as important. Kasit said he had been impressed that Thais from all walks of life had made financial donations to relief efforts in Haiti. This demonstrated that Thais wanted their country to be an active member of the international community, Kasit said, and the Thai government recognized this. In addition, the reality was that Thailand could not truly prosper if it were surrounded by nations that faced economic development challenges. As such, over the past few years, the RTG had significantly increased development aid not only to its neighbors, but also to countries such as Nepal and Bangladesh. Admiral Willard told Kasit that the RTG strategic vision was one that PACOM would like to support in whatever way possible.

#### THAILAND'S KEY GEOGRAPHIC LOCATION

¶14. (C) During a February 5 coffee at the Ambassador's residence, Dr. Sarasin Viraphol, CP Group Executive Vice President and former high-ranking Thai diplomat, characterized Thailand as a country with key advantages: centrally located between China and India; and able to work well with both nations, since Thai culture had been influenced by both. As such, Thailand could serve as a "fulcrum for the reconciliation of these two cultures." Both Sarasin and Dr. Panitan Wattanayagorn, Deputy Secretary General for PM Abhisit and Acting RTG Spokesperson, highlighted to Admiral Willard that Abhisit would visit India soon. This was a natural extension of Thai plans to increase its international influence.

15.(C) Sarasin said that Thailand could benefit from comparative advantages in the agricultural sector if the

government and people were willing to focus outward. Another potential growth area according to Sarasin was the expansion of the port of Ranong on the Andaman Sea. If this port were developed to handle high-volume traffic, Thailand could provide China with a safe and secure alternative to developing transportation links to the Indian Ocean through Burma. This would divert Chinese influence in Burma and provide Thailand with significant growth possibilities. Sarasin asked Admiral Willard for PACOM support of this endeavor.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE LOWER MEKONG INITIATIVE

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¶16. (C) PM Abhisit pointed to the Lower Mekong Initiative (LMI), announced by Secretary Clinton in July, as a mechanism particularly well-suited to assist the RTG's efforts in mainland Southeast Asia. Admiral Willard told Abhisit that the PACOM Commander role obliged him to have relationships with all of the countries involved in the LMI and welcomed suggestions from the RTG on how PACOM could complement these efforts.

¶17. (C) Sarasin and Panitan both pointed to the Mekong River region as a prime opportunity for USG and PACOM engagement, since the LMI could facilitate U.S. military assistance to the region. Some potential avenues could be to link Pacific Angels or the Pacific Partnership with the LMI, Panitan suggested.

#### PKO DARFUR DEPLOYMENT, LEBANON AS WELL?

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¶18. (C) PM Abhisit thanked Admiral Willard for potential USG equipment support for the upcoming Thai deployment to Darfur. Considering the difficulty of the deployment, U.S. assistance would go far in helping make the deployment successful. Abhisit said that support was necessary, as this deployment would be far from Thailand and would be difficult to support logistically. Admiral Willard told Abhisit that the U.S. was pleased that Thailand was deploying to Darfur, as such the USG wanted to provide assistance. Body armor and water storage equipment were the most likely items that the U.S. could provide Thailand. FM Kasit also expressed appreciation for U.S. support for the Darfur deployment and highlighted that the RTG was considering seriously a UN

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request for a two hundred person peacekeeping deployment in support of the UN mission in Lebanon.

#### THAI INTEREST IN US-JAPAN RELATIONS

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¶19. (C) PM Abhisit asked Admiral Willard for his assessment of developments in Japan, particularly in regard to the ongoing issues regarding the relocation of the U.S. Marine Corps base on Okinawa. The PACOM Commander told Abhisit that military ties were as strong as ever with the Japanese Self Defense Forces, but that the ruling DPJ was adjusting to its new role in power. That said, the Japanese government has strongly expressed its commitment to the U.S. alliance and was starting to address bilateral issues.

¶20. (U) Admiral Willard cleared this cable.  
JOHN